

Connecting with Students and Families through Home Visits



BY NICK FABER

As educators, we have many hopes and dreams for our students. We want them to succeed academically and reach their full potential during their time in our classrooms and beyond. Their parents do as well. All parents, no matter who they are or what life has dealt them, want their children to succeed. For a variety of reasons, when our students come from low-income families, we as teachers and school support staff may not interact with their parents as much as we'd like. We may not get to know them and learn of *their* hopes and dreams for their children—our students. As a result, we build assumptions about families, as they do about us.

Nick Faber is the vice president of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers. He has taught in the Saint Paul Public Schools for 29 years as an elementary school science teacher, earning national board certification in 1995. Elected board president of the national Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project in October 2014, he coordinates the local project in Saint Paul and participates in other community engagement work.

Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

Parents know things about their children that can make us better educators, but except for one or two parent-teacher conferences each year, we may not see them at school much or get an opportunity to talk with them about their child's interests. Many parents work long hours at multiple jobs to provide for their families. It's not the interest in their child's education they lack but the time to devote to it.

In 2010, as a way to build stronger partnerships between parents and their child's teacher, I helped bring the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project* to Saint Paul, Minnesota, where I have been a teacher for 29 years. The project is a national non-profit organization that was established in 1996 in California. It partners with school districts in several cities, including Boston, Denver, New York City, Reno, Sacramento, and Washington, D.C., enabling teachers to visit families so that together, parents and educators can build strong relationships to support student learning.

*To learn more about the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project, see www.pthvp.org.

How to Strengthen Parental Engagement

My colleagues and I believed at the time that the school where we were teaching, John A. Johnson Elementary School, could benefit from a stronger plan for parent engagement. This full-service community school opened its doors at eight o'clock in the morning and closed them at eight o'clock at night, with parents and students coming and going. But we started to realize that, as teachers, we really weren't interacting with many parents, even though our school offered wraparound services such as housing and job services and a dental clinic. In fact, we pretty much just saw parents at parent-teacher conferences in the fall and spring. We would also see a few parents—not necessarily the ones we most needed to reach—during parent nights at school to discuss curricular changes in math and reading or show them how they could help their students with core subjects at home.

We wondered why more parents didn't come to the school for these evening events and engage with their children's teachers. One of the things we started to realize was that a lot of our parents had not had successful experiences themselves in school. Johnson enrolled approximately 400 students, nearly all of whom received free or reduced-price meals. Most of our families were low-income and often uncomfortable coming into the school.

Secondly, we as educators began to realize that we were part of the problem: we were looking at parents from a deficit lens. We were essentially telling them, "You don't know something and we do, and we're going to ask you to come into school, a place where you don't feel comfortable, and we are going to tell you what you don't know. And then we (the staff) are going to stand around and wonder why you don't show up, and we're just going to repeat that cycle over and over again."

At the time, I taught science to kindergartners through sixth-graders at Johnson, and I was also an active member of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT). During an organizing training, I met a community organizer from California. We started talking about parent involvement (or the lack thereof, at my school), and he asked me if we had ever thought about doing home visits. I told him that we hadn't, and he shared with me what his organization was doing with the Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project (PTHVP). He gave me the organization's contact information, and I reached out to the executive director, Carrie Rose, who expressed interest in working with educators in Saint Paul.

I told our district's area assistant superintendent about the program's training, which cost \$3,000, and I got the typical response: "There's no money." So, I went to Mary Cathryn Ricker, at the time

our local president and now the executive vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, and asked if our local could fund the training. I explained to her that home visits could not only benefit our students but also help our teachers become better acquainted with the community. She was intrigued and began looking for ways to fund the initiative.

Mary Cathryn eventually found grant funding for PTHVP trainers to come to Saint Paul. They trained six of our teachers (including myself), our community school coordinator, and the principal of Johnson Elementary; Mary Cathryn participated as well.

The training took three hours; we learned the nuts and bolts of this particular model, including how to set up the visit and questions to ask to get to know a parent quickly. Visiting teachers focus on asking about the parent's hopes and dreams for his or her child and what school was like for the parent when he or she was young. Such questions let teachers learn more about parents' interests in their children's education and enable parents and teachers to better relate to each other throughout the school year. We also explored the barriers that might impede a strong visit: for instance, negative assumptions we may hold about our students' families, and fears we may have, such as making some sort of cultural faux pas when interacting with parents, especially those who are new to our country. And we discussed the importance of feeling comfortable around other cultures and languages—more than 70 are spoken in Saint Paul public schools.

Those six teachers visited about 15 families that first year. After those visits, we met as a group to debrief.

We realized we held so many different assumptions that proved to be wrong: for instance, that because a lot of our students lived in poverty, we were going to find parents who weren't passionate about their children's education and success, and houses that were falling apart and in disarray.

What we found instead was that parents really did care about their children's education and that the fundamentals to support their learning were there. They shared their stories of where they were in life, how they got there, and how they wanted better for their children.

Many parents were resistant to our visits at first. They were suspicious of our interest in coming to their houses, and understandably so—teachers in Saint Paul didn't typically do such a thing unless something was wrong (really wrong). And the fact that their child's teacher was saying she wanted to come over to "get to know you" so that she could be a better, more informed teacher was met with skepticism. But because we visited a cross section of our students, never targeting any subgroup, and offered to meet somewhere else



We wondered why more parents didn't come to the school for evening events and engage with their children's teachers.

in the community if the parents felt more comfortable doing so than meeting in their home, all the parents agreed to our visits and word got around that our efforts were sincere.

After these initial visits, we realized what a positive impact this program could make in the lives of our teachers and students. So we, as a union, decided to expand it. Again, we asked the district to buy into it. This time, I went to our district's family engagement coordinator and said, "Are you interested? We found this program really powerful." The district official expressed little interest, saying, "It's really not a direction we want to go with our parent engagement." We were disappointed but not deterred.

A few months later, we brought the idea to our bargaining team during contract negotiations. The team loved the home visit concept and put it on the bargaining table. Because we do open bargaining here, meaning the public can attend contract negotiations (and therefore parents are in the room), it would have been hard for the district to say, "No, we don't want our teachers going out and visiting parents." The district agreed to the program, and we won \$50,000 that year in our teachers' contract to fund the program. The amount, which has increased to \$75,000 in our current contract, paid for stipends for teachers' home visits. Even today, the extent of the district's involvement is limited to funding stipends, while SPFT pays the trainers for conducting the trainings for teachers before the visits.

Getting to Know Each Other

Teachers in every public school in Saint Paul can participate in this program but are not required to do so.

They are compensated \$50 for each home visit they make, and these take place outside their regular school day, on their own time. The stipend is to cover their time setting up and making the visit as well as their transportation. Typically, home visits last 30 to 40 minutes.

To receive the \$50, a teacher must complete our training, which we've extended from three hours to four. A training team made up of six teachers, a paraprofessional, two parents, and a retired teacher, all of whom have been on (or, in the case of the two parents, have received) home visits, runs the project, with occasional advice from two administrators. The team meets monthly to plan trainings and outreach and never holds a training without one of the two parents present. SPFT compensates parent trainers for their time at the same pay rate as our teachers.

Teachers must also log their visits after they occur and submit records of those visits to me, the project coordinator. And they are required to attend a two-hour debriefing session after their visits, in the fall and spring. To keep the program strong and growing, we felt that it was important to meet regularly as a group.

We encourage teachers who participate in the program to conduct a home visit in the fall with each of their families. We also encourage them to make one in the spring. We must go in pairs on the visits so that parents build relationships with two educators in the school building. And I say "educators" here, rather than "teachers," because our paraprofessionals do these visits as well. In addition to teachers, SPFT represents two groups of paraprofessionals: educational assistants, and school and community support professionals. These groups' contracts also include the PTHVP. They have the same language and compensation per visit as teachers have. Typically, these paraprofessionals go on home visits with a classroom teacher, but some paraprofessionals in our high schools visit together.

Because the emphasis of the first home visit is on establishing relationships, teachers and paraprofessionals don't bring anything with them. These visits are not for having a parent-teacher conference, getting an Individual Education Program (IEP) signed, or going over school rules—all of which can take place at another time and in a different setting. This time is sacred and meant for establishing relationships, so we don't want to raise anything that might distract from that.

The educators also don't need to take notes during their visits, since visiting homes in pairs allows them to debrief immediately after with their visiting partner. They remind each other what was discussed and bounce ideas off one another. It's especially important for teachers to remember what they learn about students—their



These visits are not for discussing how many times a student has skipped school. The purpose is to focus on the parent's hopes and dreams for his or her child.

interests and any activities they participate in after school—so they can better connect with students and possibly work that knowledge into a lesson plan.

At the spring visit, the visiting educators might bring materials along, based on the parent's expressed interests for the child from the fall meeting. Once you have established a relationship with the family and know about something the parent wants to work on with his or her child, you can follow up. For example, you might say something like, "I know you've been talking about wanting to make sure your child is up to grade level in reading this year. I heard that at our first visit, and you mentioned it at parent-teacher conferences. So I brought you these books that you might want to read this summer to help your child's literacy skills improve. I know that's something that you really value and that we can partner on."

Again, we emphasize that these visits are not for discussing how many times a student has skipped school. And they're not a place to do a report card conference. The purpose is to get to know each other and focus on the parent's hopes and dreams for his or her

child. For instance, parents often tell us they want their child to be the first in the family to attend college or they wish their child had more friends at school. We want parents to know that we, as educators, see them as an asset. The philosophy of our home visit project can be summed up this way: no matter who you are, no matter what life has dealt you, you know something about your child you can share with me that can make me a better teacher.

There's so much finger-pointing today in public education. A lot of times in social situations, people who don't know I'm a teacher will start blaming teachers for everything that's wrong. When I tell them that *I am* a teacher, they immediately pivot to blaming parents.

Educators and parents are the two groups of people who are always blamed for our students not achieving. At the end of the day, we're also the people who know our students the best. What makes our home visit project work so well is that these two groups, instead of blaming each other, are getting together and supporting each other in raising and educating these children.

Of course, there are challenges. Our biggest stumbling block right now is that most of our educators, like educators everywhere, are just short on time. In Saint Paul, schools with teachers who are making the greatest number of home visits are the ones whose principals have unlocked the class list early in the summer so that teachers can visit families during their summer vacation, when many teachers take a break from classroom teaching and have greater flexibility in scheduling these visits. Our big push now is to convince the entire district to commit to sharing class lists with our teachers by August 1. So even if teachers choose not to do home visits, they can still reach out to parents in some way, by phone or email, before school starts the day after Labor Day.

"When Are You Coming to My House?"

Since it first began in 2010, the program in Saint Paul has grown significantly. We have gone from having a handful of teachers make 15 visits five years ago to having 160 educators make more than 1,000 visits this past school year. And more than 50 of our schools, nearly all of them high-poverty, now have anywhere from two to 20 educators who have received training and have made, or are prepared to make, home visits.

Teachers and principals have been enthusiastic about this program and take pride in its success. At our debriefs, teachers report numerous benefits. They feel supported by their students' parents, and they talk about being able to communicate more freely with them. Greater communication allows teachers and parents to take care of academic and behavior problems quickly, before they get

out of hand, enabling students to stay in class and therefore increase their learning time.

An evaluation of the program,* commissioned by the national Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project and SPFT, found that teachers do indeed value the home visit model. Of the educators who visited homes during the 2013–2014 school year and who responded to a survey that was part of the evaluation, 76 percent said that home visits changed their assumptions about parents. And 93 percent said that making a home visit taught them something about their students they didn't already know.

According to the evaluation, which was also based on observations of debrief sessions, "teachers reported feeling energized by the process of home visiting," with some teachers calling it "their favorite part of the year or their job." It just makes sense that when teachers build relationships with parents and feel supported by them, they find their work rewarding.

Home visits also helped teachers strengthen their connections with colleagues. As the evaluation makes clear, "in a profession that can often isolate teachers in their classrooms, the home visiting program gave them a shared experience and time to build relationships with their fellow teachers."

Students have been receptive to these visits. Some get very excited when they know their teacher is planning to see them in their home. It's not uncommon for students to eagerly ask their teachers, "When are you coming to my house?" It may sound cliché, but one thing educators who do home visits often say is that students don't care what

you know until they know you care. Home visits show students you care.

Parents have also welcomed these visits. They respect the effort educators are making to come into their home, a place that might feel about as comfortable for the visitors as it feels for parents going into school. And just by teachers extending themselves outside the school day, they are showing parents that they actually care about their children.

Just as important, the program, which in Saint Paul is run entirely by educators and parents, has helped parents move away from seeing the teachers' union as an obstacle. Now they are saying, "Wow. Our teachers' union wants its members to go out and visit us in our community and have a relationship with us." That's a pretty powerful message to send, and it's one that has helped us organize parents to advocate for the resources their children—our students—need. □

*To read the full evaluation, *St. Paul Federation of Teachers Parent/Teacher Home Visiting Project Evaluation*, visit www.bit.ly/1ARXQb7.